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Picturing a Pandemic: Zoe Leonard's Analogue

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Abstract

This paper examines Zoe Leonard's *Analogue* and its implications in our contemporary society, tracing a globalized economic system and its perpetuation of inequalities to the present COVID-19 crisis. I argue that through temporal shifts, her photographs of closed storefront, empty streets, and an interconnected world commerce, Leonard not only depicted a moment at the turn of the twenty-first century, but also created a work that is prescient, one that speaks to our current moment. By exposing the economic system and inequalities that ordinarily remain hidden in our world, Leonard marks a historical juncture of change (that is, the closing of small businesses in NYC) while simultaneously offering us a cautionary tale about the waste and destruction of our now fully interconnected global economic system. In relating *Analogue* to the current coronavirus pandemic, I explore how these photographs resonate in a present world in which every public space is now as eerie and deserted as the lower east side of Manhattan in the late 1990s, businesses are struggling to survive, and inequalities have been exacerbated. I argue that, despite the historical specificity of what it records, Leonard's *Analogue* is prescient because of its ability to inform moments such as the current pandemic. The work subtly suggests that the issues of our contemporary moment are nothing new—in fact, they are driven by the same irrational capitalist system and inequalities that haunted Leonard's photographs at the turn of the last century.

Picturing a Pandemic: Zoe Leonard's *Analogue*

In *Analogue* (1998-2009), her decade-long documentation of small businesses and commerce, Zoe Leonard turned a keen eye towards details people tend not to notice—such as the cloth packages sitting in bunches on Leonard Street in one of the 412 photographs that make up the larger work (Figure 1). In Leonard's photograph of the Williamsburg, Brooklyn, street, there is a sense that this clothing has been cast off, abandoned and destined for donation bins.[1] Leonard displays clothing as abandoned and anonymous, tossed into packaging, arranged in neat piles. The clothing can only be distinguished by peeking into holes or from labels on the packaging, which is similarly torn, decrepit, and patched up. The pressure of weight forces a few articles of clothing to pop out of broken seams in the mattress-like piles, as if seeking to escape and return to their original owners. The piles are coded with sharpied titles such as "Poly Dress: 756." and "Zip: JKTSXXXXX: 8/4." (In these cases, the 756 signals the weight of the clothing, while the 8/4 indicates the shipment date of the lumped-up jackets.) The clothing, likely once purchased as individual, alluring new items, is now discarded and innominate, its identity reduced to its weight and the departure date by which New York City will be rid of its crude heaviness.

When she photographed the clothing on Leonard Street, Leonard thought the clothes were destined for thrift shops in the area. Later she found out that they actually were destined for a growing global used clothing trade.[2] This prompted Leonard to travel to Uganda, the arrival point for the anonymous clothing, with the intention of documenting the clothing's rebirth

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1 Tom McDonough, "The Archivist of Urban Waste: Zoe Leonard, Photographer as Rag-Picker," in *Afterall* 25 (Autumn 2010): 25.

2 Helen Molesworth, "Zoe Leonard: *Analogue*, 1998-2007," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 190.

Figure 1: Zoe Leonard, *Analogue* (Detail), 1998-2007, 11 x 11”

elsewhere, as a part of the large and growing globalized economy. Ten years later, Leonard had documented an intricate and complex system of global exchange, one which most consumers are unaware of. In doing so, Leonard not only provides a window into a passing moment at the turn of the twenty-first century in New York City, but also offers a view of the ongoing globalized and digitalized present. The tension between past and present in the work is negotiated through the artist's intimate focus on a personal and less glorified side of change in New York City. *Analogue's* power to document and characterize the realities of a shift occurring at the turn of the century, while also foreshadowing how these shifts have impacted the increasingly connected and digitalized world of the present, make it a prescient work—one that was ahead of its time, showing how unlikely connections, from past to present, are now knitted together in ways that are difficult to separate.

In the midst of the current coronavirus pandemic, I could not help but think of *Analogue* and its enduring lessons. While Leonard's images of an interconnected, globalized world certainly speak to some reasons for the virus' spread, I am not fascinated by *Analogue* as a mere illustration. Instead, I am interested in its ability to refract and bend *time*, arriving at our present moment only through a series of temporal moves back and forth. *Analogue* traces the eeriness of time on abandoned city streets and the incoherent time value of commodities from the past to the globalized present. The work's sensitivity to the uncanniness of time makes it useful in contemplating the current pandemic—a moment where time has been distorted, with a week feeling like a month and a month feeling like a week. Furthermore, and most importantly, its power lies exactly in its ability to inform the present through temporal shifts. The work does not merely document the globalized economic system that structures our world, but rather displays it's inherent weirdness—the *irrationality* of a global capitalist system that renders clothing trash

in one place only to have it reemerge and be reenergized elsewhere; and the closing of storefronts, the "all that is solid melts into air" proclivity that has rendered small businesses obsolete, resulting in ghostly empty facades. A similar strangeness has been made visible today, in which income inequality has been laid bare by the pandemic. *Analogue* is an uncanny foretelling, with images similar to those that have become all too common during the current crisis: deserted streets, once overflowing with foot traffic and urban commotion; abandoned storefronts in disrepair; piles of unclaimed and unused material. Taking a close, careful look at the photographs and their materiality in *Analogue* allows the uncanny resonance with the present to become clear.

To begin with, in *Analogue*, most photographs are devoid of human presence (Leonard walked around the city and photographed mainly in the morning when there were no pedestrians, rarely depicting herself or other humans in the photographs).[3] To anyone who might complain about the absence of human presence, Leonard reminds us: "There are always [at least] two people: the photographer and the viewer."[4] By avoiding people, the work forces us into the role of protagonist, and by extension complicit in the safeguarding of the power structures revealed by Leonard in her eerie depictions of city streets and storefronts as broken, shuttered, and abandoned. Presenting New York City as a void, empty and deserted, Leonard forces us to not only question the capitalist ethos at the turn of the last century, with the closing of neighborhood storefronts and small businesses celebrated as part of the "creative destruction" of capitalism, but also prompts us to imagine a New York after the pandemic, upon a return to "normalcy": will the texture of New York City be radically redefined? Will storefronts similarly be locked up, ghostly, discarded, and forgotten? Will small, local, and essential businesses, abandoned by an

[3] McDonough, "The Archivist of Urban Waste," 25.
[4] Zoe Leonard, *Analogue*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 169.

inept federal government, be doomed to the same fate as the local stores Leonard intimately depicts?

In many of the *Analogue* photographs taken in New York City, Leonard details her travel around her neighborhood, the Lower East Side, documenting storefronts that are grimly and unequivocally out of business. Many of the early photographs in *Analogue* are of closed storefronts with the shutters drawn down.[5] Leonard has noted that she is interested in the city's "violent reconfiguration of its own landscape," and structures that are "fossils of a time past."[6] In a photograph of Canal Street from 2003 (Figure 2), for example, Leonard documents the Zenith ABC storefront. The metal Zenith logos on both sides of the storefront are broken down, with the Z on the right broken off, and the Z on the left unhinged and peeling off the surface. The lettering elsewhere is fading, with the once red text of "United Trading Corp" dissolving into white, and "Electrical Appliances China Silverware" barely distinguishable. Indeed, there is a sense that the building owner is in the process of removing the Zenith storefront for a new incoming store, wiping away the text and removing the Zenith metal sign. This sense of loss, with the new replacing the old, is coupled by that day's newspaper floating through the wind past the historical storefront. The store is rooted and decaying, on the verge of being replaced, while the newspaper stamps time onto the photograph. Time will go on, Zenith ABC will be forgotten.

As Leonard progressed in her project, she moved from closed storefronts to storefronts doomed to close but not yet vacated. In the second chapter of *Analogue,* she focuses on open stores, in what art historian Helen Molesworth has called a "testament to what history is

5 Molesworth, "Zoe Leonard," 188.
6 Leonard, *Analogue,* 171.

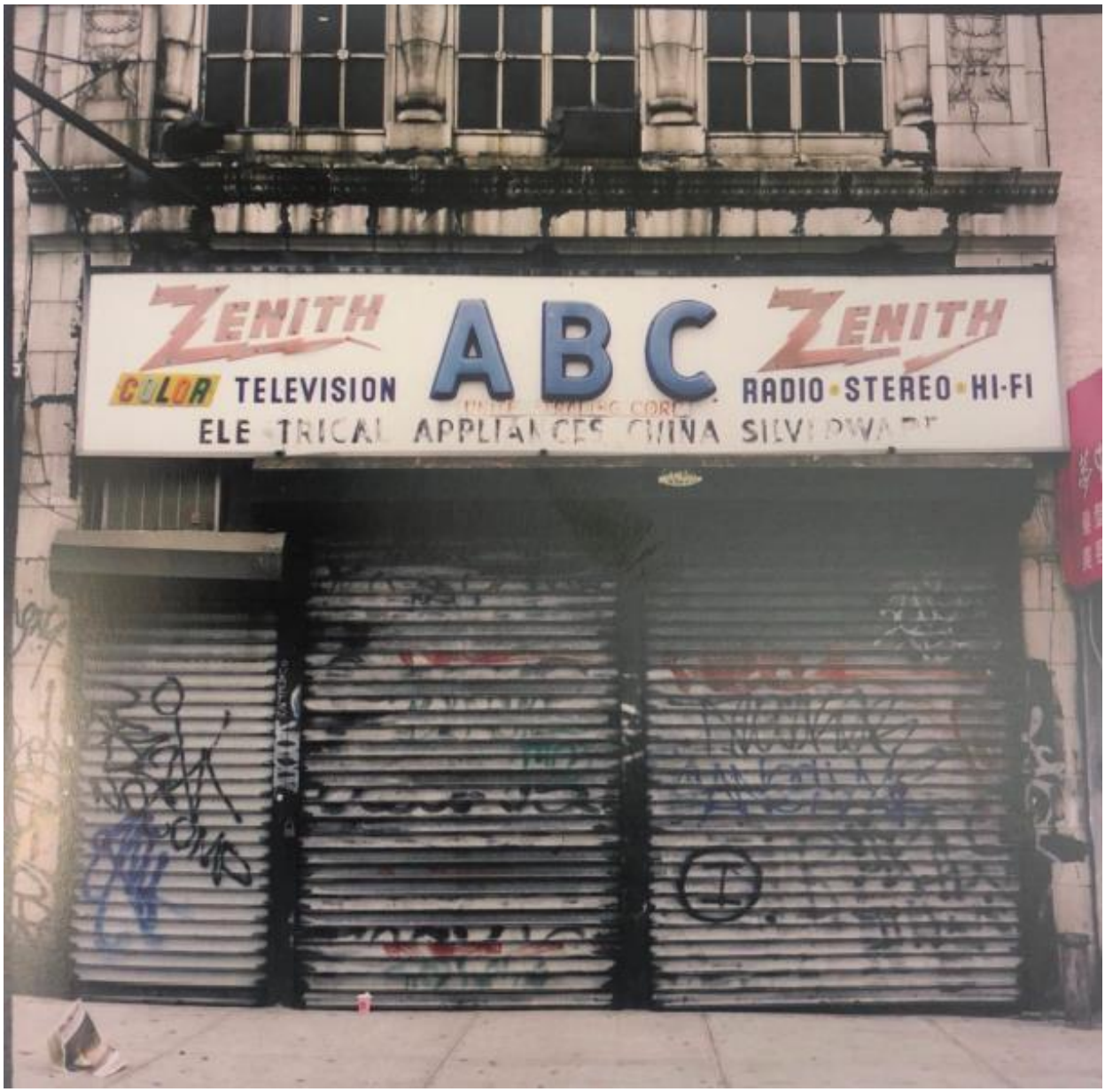

Figure 2: Zoe Leonard, *Analogue* (Detail), 1998-2007, 11 x 11”

currently in the process of leaving behind."[7] Unlike the photograph of Zenith ABC, these photographs don't mark storefronts as historical and relics of the past. In her photograph of Roger's T.V. Service on Ave. B (2000, Figure 3), Leonard insists on a personal feeling of loss, this time towards obsolete technology. Roger's T.V. is still open but is clearly on the verge of closing. The text on the top of the storefront, like in other photographs, is fading, morphing from red into a mix of pink and white. A crudely composed "Aircondition Sales Service" sign sits outside of the store, just below TVs and other technologies that are clearly aged. Outside of the store are three of these TVs, seemingly left to giveaway or destined for the garbage truck. The TV sitting to the left is particularly isolated and neglected. Paint has been splattered on it, perhaps from the store's attempt to spruce up its front display. There is something profoundly morbid about this attempt at restoration. Many small businesses during the COVID-19 crisis, like restaurants and their suppliers, are similarly desperate to reinvent themselves. As local storefronts gasp for air during the pandemic and are, perhaps, in the process of being left behind, many have had to creatively attempt to restore their businesses: restaurants have desperately scaled up delivery and the sale of pre-packed meals; suppliers have started selling to individual consumers to compensate for the loss of business from restaurants. As the overhead sign at Roger's T.V. continues to degrade, and the current pandemic continues to wound small businesses, sensing impending doom, small business owners, then and now, scramble to stylize, improve, or overhaul their businesses to make up for their precarious positions.

[7] *Analogue* consists of three chapters. The first focuses on storefronts that are undoubtedly closed. The second pictures stores, specifically those in immigrant communities, that are on the verge of closing. The final chapter traces storefronts and commerce globally, to Uganda and elsewhere. See Molesworth, "Zoe Leonard," 188.

Figure 3: Zoe Leonard, *Analogue* (Detail), 1998-2007, 11 x 11”

Obsolete technologies, like those outside of Roger's T.V., resonate with Leonard's Rolleiflex, an analogue camera deemed archaic in the age of digital technology. As Leonard states, "New technology is usually pitched to us as an improvement. . . .But progress is always an exchange. We gain something, we give something else up. I'm interested in looking at some of what we are losing.''[8] Her intimate address towards obsolete technology sitting outside the store recalls surrealist interest in the outmoded, with the TVs posed like figures for a portrait. Addressing the posed TVs with her Rolleiflex, Leonard is forced to hold the camera against and at the height of her torso. While the photograph acts as a witness to the truth of this store's closing, the position of the camera makes it subjective, and personal, as the photograph emanates from a specific and unusual point of view.[9] The disappearing storefront and antiquated technology at Roger's T.V. is reflected in Leonard's threatened Rolleiflex, with the camera lens, T.Vs, and store window all mirroring each other's obsoletion.[10] Paralleling her camera with the posed products, Leonard returns dignity to the TVs, equating the outmoded technology outside of Roger's with her own. Leonard dignifies struggling storefronts through her intimate, portrait-like address. Through this parallel between her Rolleiflex and struggling stores, she provides a route to honor and support local small businesses in the present, in a time of crisis and struggle—decaying and declining storefronts can be reenergized with dignity.

Like her photograph of Roger's T.V., addressed in a personal manner through her Rolleiflex camera's intimate address, Leonard connects her own artistic practice to a storefront serving the immigrant community of the Lower East Side on Ludlow Street (1999, Figure 4).

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8 Ibid., 188.
9 Ibid., 190.
10 McDonough, "The Archivist of Urban Waste," 24.

Figure 4: Zoe Leonard, *Analogue* (Detail), 1998-2007, 11 x 11"

Leonard documents the process of gentrification at precisely the moment when the store teeters on the edge between closure and survival. Leonard documents the business as a survivor, and to some extent implicates herself and the viewer in the storefront's imminent closing. The store offers a variety of services, written in both English and Spanish, hanging from the store window or posted on the store sign above. Services include income tax support, "*divorcios*," "immigration," "*traducciones*," and "*envio de valores*." The last three services—immigration, translation, and sending money—provide insight into the life of the immigrant community in the Lower East Side and demonstrate the importance of the business to the community. The store is an important neighborhood support system for immigrants, but given what we know about Leonard, is surely doomed. Presaging the inequality that has been perpetuated and further exposed during the coronavirus pandemic—a crisis that has disproportionally impacted minority communities—the closing of this storefront is part of the larger issues of gentrification and disadvantage facing these communities: like the store, the immigrant community is being pushed out of the Lower East Side; it's neighborhood support system is being destroyed.

In a move unusual for the project, Leonard implicates herself in this photograph, positioning her reflection in the right window, next to the crates in the left window which signal the stores impending close. Her position in the photograph relates to how the closing of these storefronts resonated with her life: "It was only as these old shops began disappearing that I realized how much I counted on them—that this layered, frayed, and quirky beauty underlined my own life.''[11] Similarly, today we have only truly begun to comprehend the importance of essential businesses, like bodegas, and essential workers, during the COVID-19 crisis. Leonard involves herself and the viewer in the process of closing, only recognizing the storefront's

[11] Molesworth, "Zoe Leonard," 189.

importance upon its impending doom. Leonard and the viewer are personal witnesses, and are perhaps complicit, in the process of gentrification, and the loss inherent in the closing of a neighborhood store. Considering what may be lost in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, one can only wonder how much we count on the few remaining quirky storefronts of 2020; the "layered" and textural beauty encompassing the streets of New York. If loss is what forces us to appreciate neighborhood stores, we may only realize their importance to our own lives when they are gone.

Leonard's personal connection with obsolete technologies and shuttered storefronts through her Rolleiflex, is the most profound expression of time in *Analogue*: time is literally stamped on the photographs via Leonard's practice. Through analogue photography's materiality, Leonard personally connects with the destruction of storefronts and technologies, sympathizing with relics of the past, left to decay. In her interest in what is lost with the advent of digital technology, Leonard has highlighted the texture and character of analogue photography. Creating an analogue photograph leaves marks of age, chance, and accident due to the exposure process. Time exposure implies a certain vulnerability to chance and mistakes.[12] As art historian Margaret Iverson notes, the exposure process leaves traces of artistic choice and chance in the photograph: "Agency is involved in setting up the apparatus and in judging the outcome; between these moments, chance is allowed to intervene. While this bracketing of intentionality is a choice, the material that emerges is outside the artist's control."[13] Leonard's insistence on using obsolete technology to reinforce analogue's distinct process and materiality, contrasts digital photography's "tidying-up" of our present world, with images encountered on

[12] Margaret Iverson, "Analogue: On Zoe Leonard and Tacita Dean," in Critical Inquiry 38, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 803.
[13] Ibid., 803.

social media.[14] In many ways the unpredictable nature of the exposure process reflects the unpredictability of Leonard's encounters in the world she photographs. Walking the streets of New York City, or elsewhere in the world, Leonard photographs what strikes her as she finds her subjects, with the resulting photograph a decision made based on position and choice of subject, but also left up to chance in the exposure process.

Chance, and, moreover, the uncertainty of the time exposure procedure, resonates with our contemporary COVID-19 dilemma, marred by anxiety, the future unpredictable and cloudy. But, importantly, Leonard does not shun such ambiguity, instead embracing the unpredictability of her medium, its material quirkiness, treating analogue as a "site of resistance." [15] Her embrace of analogue's enigmatic result in its exposure process reflects a desire to address the "tidying up" of digital technology. Clearly, then, *Analogue* has political potential: its acceptance of chance and uncertainty negates the assumption of "development" over time, from the turn of the last century to the present—a progression of time where storefronts, clothing, and technologies are cycled in and out, always to be discarded. While analogue technology does not accommodate the contemporary world by any means, it's use is a way to *resist* the increasingly fleeting tactile quality of photographs, digitalization, and economic systems that govern our world. By holding on to what is old, Leonard harkens back to the materiality of the analogue photograph and reinforces its power, thereby asserting the fading palpability of texture in our flat, digital world, and renouncing capitalism's creative destruction.

Leonard's use of antiquated technology alongside her documentation of the global economic system affirms *Analogue*'s political potency: it's photographs' unpredictable

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[14] Ibid., 815.

[15] Jordan Troeller, "Against Abstraction: Zoe Leonard's *Analogue*," in *Art Journal* 69, no. 4 (December 2010), 116.

materiality, paired with images of destruction, forces viewers in the present to interact, and come to terms with the work's resonance today. Viewers are forced to encounter this economic structure and its system of perpetual elimination. However, the work has the potential to encourage viewers to not only reflect, but also recognize that we have been caught in the loop of this capitalist ethos, which has become assumed, and all too certain. In the wake of the police murder of George Floyd, we have seen much of society mobilize to upset the system and question the status quo. While the movement has clearly centered on police brutality and defunding the police, it has also been responding to the same inequalities Leonard pictured, those that have been exacerbated today during the pandemic. Leonard's photograph from Ludlow Street, then, with its documentation of the process of gentrification, a storefront teetering on the edge, relays the same systemic issues from twenty years ago to the present. The photograph on Ludlow Street pictures creative destruction laid bare, capturing "what has been," and thereby forcing viewers to question the storefront's replacement. Through its temporal shifts, picturing this decimation of local businesses and communities, *Analogue* alludes to the *process* that has led to a compounding effect, tracing these same problems to the present—a moment when inequalities have been exacerbated, and a period where much of the remaining local storefronts will be subsumed into a new wave of disappearance, forgotten and removed from the fabric of the city.

The powerful and far-reaching depiction of loss and destruction in *Analogue* reveals a tumultuous period of change dictated by the interconnected economic systems of our world. But, at the same time, it goes at lengths to try to encourage a consideration of the world's future. This seems to be where *Analogue* gets the grimmest. *Analogue* leaves the viewer with this question: what happens to the future world if global digitalization and aberrant economic systems continue

to rule and grow? In the time of the coronavirus pandemic, *Analogue* forces us to grapple with even more profound questions: what do we want our society to look like when we emerge from this dark episode? Do we want to return to the same dynamics before the crisis, a social makeup defined by massive class division and inequalities? While Leonard characterizes the changes that have impacted the present, she leaves these questions unanswered and leaves the consequences of the future up to the viewer. However, perhaps in the materiality of analogue photography, and her emphasis on the obsolete technology's political potential, Leonard proposes a route for individuals to resist troubling change. Leonard offers a glimmer of hope through her use of the outmoded, proposing a solution to troubling world change that encourages viewers to question the trends of the contemporary moment, and the underlying capitalist system that powers these changes in our world.

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